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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest discusses various types of homework assignments and examines research findings about the effectiveness and amount of homework assigned to American schoolchildren. It also examines some of the policies presently being discussed by school districts. Three types of homework are briefly delineated: practice assignments, preparation assignments, and extension assignments. Conflicting research findings regarding the relationship of homework to academic achievement are discussed and a recommendation is made that school districts should determine whether homework, as they define and construct it, meets the district's educational objectives. Several questions are presented to help determine what issues should be considered when developing homework policies. The digest concludes that individualized homework assigned to appropriate grade levels seems to help students develop the disciplined study skills that result in increased scholastic achievement. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

Developing Homework Policies

Recent reports on excellence in education recommend that teachers increase the amount of homework they assign and that school administrators establish demanding homework requirements. This Digest discusses various types of homework assignments and examines research findings about the effectiveness and amount of homework assigned to American schoolchildren. It also examines some of the policies presently being discussed by school districts.

What Is Homework?

Homework is the out-of-class tasks that a student is assigned as an extension of classroom work. Three types are commonly assigned in the United States: practice, preparation, and extension (LaConte 1981).

Practice assignments. Practice assignments reinforce newly acquired skills or knowledge. Students who have learned about a particular chemical reaction, for instance, may be asked to find examples of the reaction in their own environment. These assignments are most effective when carefully evaluated by the teacher, when matched to the ability and background of the individual student, and when students are asked to apply recent learning directly and personally.

Preparation assignments. Intended to provide background information, these assignments can include readings in the class text, library research, collecting materials for a class demonstration, and other activities requiring the gathering or organizing of information before a class discussion or demonstration.

Effective preparation includes guidelines on why and how the assignment should be completed. In addition, accurately estimating a task's level of difficulty and coordinating the assignment of difficult homework among various courses may help teachers avoid overburdening students.

Extension assignments. These assignments encourage individualized and creative learning by emphasizing student initiative and research. Frequently long-term continuing projects that parallel classwork, extension assignments require students to apply previous learnings.

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How Useful Is Homework?

The literature examining the relationship between homework and academic achievement is basically inconclusive. No studies have been able to control the many variables that affect this relationship (LaConte 1981; Knorr 1981; and McDermott and others 1984). Nevertheless, reviews of students', teachers', and parents' perceptions reveal that all believe homework helps students achieve better grades.

In addition, some recent studies have uncovered a more positive relationship between homework and student performance. For example,

- Increased homework time resulted in higher grades for high school seniors of all ability levels. Moreover, through increased study, lower-ability students achieved grades commensurate with those of brighter peers (Keith 1982).
- One to 2 hours of homework a day were associated with the highest levels of reading performance for 13-year-olds. For 17-year-olds, reading performance increased as the amount of time spent on homework increased. Students spending more than 2 hours a night on homework showed the highest performance levels (Ward and others 1983).
- Schools that assigned homework frequently showed higher student achievement levels than did schools that made little use of homework (Rutter and others 1979).

Rather than rely on conflicting research findings, school districts might more profitably determine whether homework, as they define and construct it, meets school and district educational objectives (Knorr 1981).

How Much Homework Is Assigned/Completed?

Although researchers generally agree that the amount of homework increases significantly as students progress through school, their findings do not agree about the number of homework hours assigned or completed by American students. The issue is further complicated because the amount of homework assigned or

performed varies according to gender and grade level of student and according to type of school.

Many homework studies focus on the upper grade levels. However, a recent survey conducted by the United States Bureau of the Census (1984) reports that, at the elementary level, public school students spend 4.9 hours and private school students spend 5.5 hours a week on homework. The survey also reported that girls do more homework than boys and that Blacks and Hispanics do more than Whites. High school students reported doing almost 7 hours of homework a week, ranging from 6.5 hours for public school students to 14.2 hours for private school students. The report attributes the difference to the college-preparatory orientation of many private schools and the more diverse nature of public schools.

How Are Some School Districts Implementing Recommendations for Increased Homework?

Many school districts have developed local programs and policies to answer the call for increased homework issued by education commissions. For example, Frank J. Macchiarola, Chancellor of New York City Schools, presented a citywide homework policy to principals and community school superintendents. The chancellor's regulation set a minimum nightly homework policy to be monitored by principals. These nightly minimums range from 20 minutes for first and second grades to 2 hours for ninth through twelfth grades. The objective of the policy is to reinforce the lessons taught in the classroom, stimulate further interest in the topics taught, and develop independent study skills ("Homework Minimum" 1983).

On the other hand, in Maryland, the Montgomery County School Board of Education rejected a proposal to increase the time high school students spend on homework. The proposal would have required a minimum of 3 hours of homework a week in all classes. Those voting against the proposal objected that no numbers were available on the amount of homework Montgomery County students were assigned and said that the teacher, not the school board, should decide how much homework to assign ("Montgomery County School Board" 1984).

What Issues Should Be Considered When Developing Homework Policies?

The homework issue raises many recurring questions, among them the following:

What kind of homework is most effective?

How much homework is appropriate?

At what age is homework a useful learning tool?

Who is responsible for deciding how much homework to assign?

Who is responsible for monitoring homework?

While these questions are unlikely to be answered in the same way in all schools and school districts, what can be said is that individualized homework assigned to appropriate grade levels seems to help students develop the disciplined study habits that result in increased scholastic achievement.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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